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ABSTRACT

Attitude and opinion research requires considerable planning, careful design of survey procedures and sampling techniques, and practical ways of collecting, analyzing, and reporting results. The following suggestions are based on the extensive public opinion research conducted by the University of Alabama. (1) Decide what specific problem is to be solved and whether a survey is the best way to solve it. (2) State the survey objectives clearly in writing. (3) Define the survey population. (4) Allow enough time to plan, conduct, and report the survey. (5) Identify and eliminate biases. (6) Be aware of politics involved. (7) Do not hesitate to ask others for assistance. (8) Budget costs to assure an accurate survey. (9) Recognize survey limitations. (10) Provide for "no opinion" responses. (11) Determine advantages and disadvantages among mailed questionnaires, personal interviews, and telephone surveys. (12) Develop the survey instrument in terms of the type of survey and the budget. (13) Determine the survey procedure in terms of the entire population or a random sample. (14) Design a brief, specific, concise questionnaire using input from those to be surveyed. (15) Pre-test the questionnaire with groups similar to those to be surveyed. (16) Provide a stamped, self-addressed envelope with mailed questionnaires. (17) Tabulate the results as soon as possible and release them. A selected bibliography is appended. (MB)

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by

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Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (San Francisco, April 8-12, 1979)

Assessing Public Opinions and Attitudes Through Citizen Surveys*

by

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Much of the opinion and attitude research that you and I regularly see offers some interesting facts and figures about public attitudes and opinions. And many times when we don't know what these attitudes and opinions are someone will invariably suggest "Let's conduct a poll" or "Let's take a survey." Whether the survey be in the form of a personal interview, a telephone call, a mail-out questionnaire or one of several other ways of collecting responses, accurately measuring public opinions and attitudes is a delicate process requiring considerable planning, careful design of survey procedures and sampling techniques, and practical ways of collecting, analyzing, and reporting results. In many cases, however, results from surveys are invalid or unreliable because the novice researcher does not know or fails to recognize many of the pitfalls of survey procedure. Hence the results may be biased, but worse than that, may actually misrepresent public opinions and attitudes.

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In the early 1970's the Institute of Higher Education Research and Services at The University of Alabama initiated preliminary planning in undertaking a statewide survey designed to accurately measure and assess public opinions and attitudes toward postsecondary education in Alabama. During the next four years, varying amounts of time were devoted to planning for the research project. In Fall, 1975, the research was undertaken as a full-time project of the Institute and during the next seven months development of the questionnaire and design of the appropriate sampling procedures were completed. The survey was conducted by mail in June-July, 1976. From a modified random sample of 1251 Alabamians age 16 and over, 680 usable replies were received resulting in a 54.5 percent response rate and yielding a probable error of less than four percent at the 95 percent confidence level.

In order to provide comparative data, the survey was repeated in 1977, using the same procedures but drawing from a different sample. A few of the questions were changed or modified but the majority of the questions were included in both surveys. Again the survey was conducted by mail in June-July, 1977. From a modified random sample of 1259 Alabamians age 16 and over, 655 usable questionnaires were received resulting in a 52.8 percent response rate and yielding a probable error of less than four percent at the 95 percent confidence level. Although there were some minor changes in public attitudes and opinions, no significant variations were noted.

If you are interested in the results of the two surveys and a summary of the 1977 survey I have copies of these reports.

If you would like either one or both see me after this presentation.

During the more than six years of planning and conducting these two citizens surveys, our Institute staff gained considerable knowledge on design and procedures for conducting opinion and attitude surveys as well as ways for reporting and analyzing results. For the next few minutes let me share with you suggestions for undertaking surveys and some of the pitfalls to watch out for.

OPINION AND ATTITUDE RESEARCH: THERE IS A DIFFERENCE

First of all, as Walter Lindenmann points out, there is a difference in opinion and attitude research. Usually an attitude refers to the full range of impressions a person holds toward a social object including what the person says, what the person knows and thinks, how the person feels, and how the person is inclined to act. In other words an attitude includes verbal, mental, emotional, and motivational experiences. An opinion, however, usually refers only to what a person says. The person's actions may or may not agree with his opinions. Since so many factors make an attitude, measuring attitudes is usually sophisticated and complex and often expensive, while measuring an opinion is relatively simple and inexpensive.

As Lindenmann points out the methodology involved in attitude research relies on a broad assortment of different techniques including, the survey, the laboratory experiment, various methods of observation, projective tests, content analysis, etc., while opinion research usually relies on only one of these

techniques--usually the survey. For purposes of discussion here, let's concentrate on opinion surveys since they are the principal method of research because of simplicity and costs. Here is a summary of suggestions I would make to persons interested in undertaking a survey.

- Opinion and attitude research is not for the novice researcher. College and university officials who have never done reserach in these areas would be better off consulting with experts or contracting with research agencies unless they can devote considerable time in planning for the survey and in conducting the actual research.

- Decide what specific problem you are trying to solve and determine if a survey is the best way to find the solution. If, for example, you want to know what certain people think about a given topic you may choose to survey them. If a survey is neither appropriate nor feasible, don't plan one.

- State your objectives clearly, in writing, when you are thinking about conducting a survey. What is it you want to find out? What questions are absolutely necessary in determining what you want to find? From your list of objectives you can begin to move to other planning phases of the survey. Objectives should be revised as necessary.

- Who do you want to survey? Define your universe. If, for example you want to do an alumni survey for your institution, then the universe (or defined population) of your survey would be all the alumni of your institution. You can do a universe survey or a sample. If you do a sample survey, be extremely sensitive as to how you draw the sample from your universe. A random sample means everyone in the universe (or your defined population) has an equal chance of being selected. A random sample does not mean stopping 20 people on the street to ask a few questions or calling 200 people from the telephone book. These are what I refer to as "haphazard" sampling.

- Time. Allow enough time to plan, conduct, and report your survey. Invariably this is my biggest weakness--I always underestimate the amount of time. You must allow for unexpected delays.

- Biases. Bias is a four letter word and in research, especially opinion research, it will jeopardize reliability and validity of the entire research project. In many cases the researcher will build biases into a study and

not even realize it. Try to look at all angles of the survey in order to identify and eliminate biases.

. Politics. Although I won't elaborate on the subject of the politics involved in opinion and attitude research in this presentation, remember that "once you open a can of worms, the only way to recan them is to use a larger can."

. Help. Don't be afraid to ask others for assistance, especially colleagues at your institution or other places who have special competencies in such areas as market research, management, tests and measurement, statistics, communications, language arts, political science, etc.

. Costs. Surveys cost money. Accurate surveys cost more money. If you have neither the time nor the money to undertake a project that will give accurate and usable results then for your own sake, don't undertake it. If you're going to use interviewers and pay them, be sure you include their pay in a budget and a plan for training them. If you expect volunteer help then be sure you know their competencies and skills and don't overestimate their abilities. It's a common problem to undertake a survey and half way through realize that you're not going to have enough money to complete it. But because you've started, you feel your integrity is at stake and it must be completed come hell or high water. So you begin cutting back here and there and pretty soon, you've drawn a haphazard sample, are asking biased questions by using untrained, unskilled interviewers and are still expecting to release a valid and reliable study.

. Limitations. Don't forget that regardless of whatever research project you undertake you will have certain limitations. In opinion research learn to recognize and state the limitations of your survey. Obviously you want to eliminate as many limitations as possible but the quality researcher will try to include in a study those factors which were either set or over which he or she had no control.

. No opinion responses. For almost every question in our surveys we provided a "no opinion" or "not sure" choice or both, unless we wanted to force a positive or negative response from those surveyed. By including these choices, you probably get a more accurate idea of the state of public opinions.

. Type of survey. There are several different methods of surveying people. Three commonly used methods are the mail-out questionnaire, the interview, and the telephone survey. All have advantages and disadvantages.

A mail-out questionnaire is usually the cheapest kind. It also has the lowest response rate; but by using some techniques specialists have monitored over the years you can expect a response rate of 50 percent or more. Fifty percent is considered a good return rate. Specialists suggest that hand-stamping--preferably with a nice commemorative stamp--rather than metering an envelope increases response. In fact they suggest that the more expensive the postage the higher the response rate--all the way up through air-mail special delivery. Since you will have to calculate these factors, I suggest using an advance notification card as Reader's Digest uses, informing the participant of his selection in the sample and soliciting his cooperation. I'll mention more about the mail survey later on.

Another method is the personal interview. An interview survey is somewhat more accurate and much more expensive. Interviewers must be trained. If they aren't, people may tend to lie to them--not intentionally in most cases, but rather they tend to answer questions they way they think the interviewer wants them to be answered, rather than the way they really feel. An interview survey also permits immediate follow-up to questions. Even though some people will refuse to participate you should have a higher response rate than by mail questionnaires. Disadvantages are that people don't feel as anonymous and the interviewers may make mistakes in recording answers.

A third commonly used survey method is the telephone interview. It fits somewhere between mail questionnaires and personal interviews as far as accuracy of response and costs. The survey method you select may be determined to a large extent by the economic realities of the project.

. Survey Instrument. The survey instrument to some extent may be determined by the type of survey and the budget. Is it better to have a closed (forced-choice) questionnaire or an open-ended questionnaire? Again there are advantages of each and both are acceptable. It's easier to handle data from closed questionnaires. In any event keep questions simple and to the point.

. Survey procedure. As I mentioned before you can survey your entire universe or draw a sample. If you use random sampling, a very small sample can accurately reflect the opinions of your entire universe. As Cletis Pride points out in a paper entitled "Let's Take a Survey," the size of the sample does not have to increase proportionately with the size of the universe. If your universe is 200 people, you should sample about 105. If your universe is 5,000, a sample that gives 210 responses will be adequate. If the universe doubles to about 10,000 your sample should be around 215. For 100,000 or so it should be

about 220. For most purposes you would rarely need more than 250 responses, provided your sample has been scientifically selected.

. Random sampling. Selecting a random sample is not as difficult as you might think. Again as Pride points out, let's assume our universe is 10,000 and we want a sample of 215. If we're doing a mail survey, we should probably select about 450 names from our list in order to get about 215 responses. That means we're going to send a questionnaire to every 22nd person in the universe. In order to insure a random start, and that's important, go to a table of random numbers (found in the back of any statistics book) and find the first number between one and 22. That will be the first name in your sample. Then add 22 to that number, take that name and so on until you've got all 450 names.

. Ways to increase responses. If you use a mail-out survey as we did, here are some suggestions to increase responses:

1) Send an advance notification card.

2) Enclose a stamped, self-addressed return envelope, not a business reply envelope. The stamp, by the way, should be a regular, run-of-the mill postage stamp and not a special commemorative stamp on the return envelope.

3) Design a questionnaire that's easy to complete and preferably short. Involve those whom you are planning to survey in the planning process.

4) Always conduct a pilot survey (or pre-test), and solicit suggestions.

5) Accompany the questionnaire with a letter of explanation signed by a prestigious individual. The letter should explain to individuals why it is important for them to participate and that as participants they will remain anonymous.

6) Never put a code number on a questionnaire or ask for the respondents name, unless there are reasons for knowing who the respondent was. We devised a method for coding return envelopes which we could check off a master list as returned.

7) Ask those demographic questions (you know the ones about age, race, sex, etc.) at the end of the questionnaire rather than at the beginning. We found people would almost always answer those when at the end of the questionnaire. The one question that people most often

left blank or refused to answer was income, but even then, only less than 6% of the total number of respondents failed to answer the question.

8) Follow-up your first mailing. We sent out a second letter, another questionnaire, and stamped return envelope to those who hadn't responded, exactly two weeks after the first mailout. In both of our surveys we had greater than 50 percent response rates.

9) Analyze your responses and get results out as quickly as possible. The results of any survey, especially an opinion survey should be released while they're still current.

All you need to do now is add work and worry. I have available one of the best annotated bibliographies on current survey research that I have seen. It was prepared by Dr. Edward Gruson of the Sloan Commission on Government and Higher Education at Cambridge, Massachusetts. If you would like a copy please let me know.

In summary, then, here's your survey checklist:

1) Define your problem. Decide if a survey is the best road to a solution.

2) State the objectives of the survey in writing.

3) Define your universe (or population).

4) Decide on survey procedure and size of the sample.

5) Draw your sample using the random technique. Always protect the confidentiality of your survey respondents.

6) Design the questionnaire

   a) be brief
   b) be specific
   c) be clear and concise
   d) solicit input from those to be surveyed.

7) Pre-test the questionnaire with groups similar to those to be surveyed.

8) Administer survey instrument. If it is a mail questionnaire, be sure and include a stamped, self

addressed return envelope and a letter of explanation, and mail a follow-up questionnaire two or three weeks after the first. If it is an interview or telephone survey be sure your interviewers are properly trained.

9) Tabulate and analyze returns (use a computer for analysis and cross-tabs).

10) Release results as soon as possible while they're still usable.

And remember Gordon's First Law:

"If a research project is not worth doing at all, it is not worth doing well."

Selected Annotated Bibliography

Erdos, Paul L. Professional Mail Surveys. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970.

An easy-to-follow text by a recognized authority in market research.

Haskins, J. B. "Pretesting Editorial Items and Ideas for Reader Interest." Journalism Quarterly, 37 (Spring, 1960), 224-230.

Discusses alternatives to kinds of surveys. He used a sample of the target audience and rated their interest in titles. The assumption was that a reader decides to read an article on the basis of its apparent content. Members of the sample rate the titles (and/or subtitles) on a scale of 0-100 depending on interest. If a title gets a good rating, you use it.

Lindenmann, Walter K. Attitude and Opinion Research: Why You Need It/How to Do It. Washington, D.C.: Council for Advancement and Support of Education, 1977, 83 pp.

A handbook designed to introduce the reader to opinion and attitude research, indicates the advantages of getting professional help, and tells how to do your own mail surveys. Also has nine sample questionnaires.

Parten, Mildred. Surveys, Polls and Samples: Practical Procedures. New York: Cooper Square Publications, 1966.

A how-to-do-it book first published 25 years ago, but still a highly regarded source.

Payne, Stanley. The Art of Asking Questions. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1951.

An excellent reference, in spite of its age. Designed to help the researcher ask questions in practical ways.

Pride, Cletus. "Let's Take a Survey." Techniques. Washington, D.C.: Council for the Advancement and Support of Education, June, 1973, 4 pp.

Summarizes how to conduct surveys, discusses alternate ways of conducting these inquiries, and makes suggestions on ways to increase responses and analyze data, all in a brief and concise form.